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OSCAR WILDE

BY

DAL YOUNG, M.A. OXON.

LONDON:

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IT is not intended in this paper to reopen the question which, for all present practical purposes, was decided by the jury in Mr. Oscar Wilde's recent trial at the Central Criminal Court, as to whether or not he had committed certain misdemeanours. [My present object is to offer some considerations in opposition to the mass of general vituperation with which the irresponsible public has

PURPOSE

thought fit to demonstrate its own virtue and its superiority to the author of Dorian Gray.

I shall endeavour to show what appears to me to have been the spirit of Mr. Wilde's life and work, and to consider whether any unhealthy or morbid element can be found in them which can diminish the debt of gratitude which we owe to him as an artist ; and I hope I shall not be accused of disloyally wishing to criticize the action of the Court or the decision of the jury, if, when I come to consider such portions of his work as were produced in the two trials, I venture to suggest an interpretation of them differing materially from that which was put upon them by the prosecution.

The word perhaps of all others

which has been the greatest stumbling-block to the mass of Mr. Wilde's detractors, is the word beauty.

There is nothing which most of us find so difficult to forgive as the assumption that beauty has any serious importance; it is always taken as equivalent to an assumption that nothing else, especially morality, has any serious importance.

Any writer is allowed to write or speak of morality without taking any notice of art or beauty of any kind, and yet it is not always assumed that a preacher is necessarily incapable of enjoying a piece of music or a picture; but if a man writes or speaks about beauty only, and does not preach ethics also, it is assumed by many not only that he does not interest himself at all

in morals but that he positively denies their existence.

In fact, the two planes of morality and art being essentially different, most people see life from the point of view of one only, to the exclusion of the other ; and if they come across a man who chooses to express himself publicly only on that point of view which is not their own, they can hardly be expected to appreciate his work, especially if they are so foolish as to assume that his silence on their favourite topics implies either ignorance or indifference or a perverted judgment concerning them. Such an assumption is of course utterly unwarrantable.

Remembering, then, that Mr. Wilde has occupied himself almost exclusively with expression concerning art, this

paper will ask why it is that so many people have thought fit to hate him on grounds which they declare to be moral. No doubt in many cases virtuous indignation was merely a cloak for envy and malignancy, but in some cases certainly there was a genuine conviction that Mr. Wilde was teaching something contrary to morality.

Let us consider what is the nature of the accusations which are made against him.

It is said that his love for beauty was a pose, that his books were immoral, that his influence on his friends was bad, and that his life was vicious.

As regards the first of these accusations, we are not, to begin with, really concerned about the point at all.

If it *had* been the case that he had simulated a love of the beautiful which he did not feel, it would have been a matter of grave importance to himself, but not to us ; for if Mr. Wilde praises beauty in a convincing and beautiful manner—and whether he does so is a question of art, and not of morality—the effect on us is precisely the same, whatever his motive may have been.

Supposing, for instance, that it should be discovered that Milton was in reality an atheist and an obscurantist who wrote “Paradise Lost,” and the “Areopagitica,” merely because he thought that they would pay, would the one be the less beautiful, or the other less cogent ?

To attempt to pass from a work of art to the motive of the artist is not

criticism but impertinent curiosity ; just as to descend from literary or artistic criticism to mere personal abuse is always only a proof that the critic has no criticism to offer. But besides this, there does not appear to be the slightest reason for doubting the sincerity of Mr. Wilde's utterances ; for sincerity is by no means synonymous with dullness, and a theory may be true even though it is brilliant.

When we come to examine what these statements were, which are alleged to be so insincere, they are little more than that he found it pleasant to look at certain flowers, jewels and so on, and that he took some pride in being able to use his senses, (that of sight for instance), for what was to him so valuable a purpose.

After all, the most respectable poets have told us that many things were beautiful, and that their beauty had a value. We are accustomed to hear without resentment that a daisy, a cloud, a pearl are beautiful, independent of utility, but when we are told that a book is beautiful, independent of its morality, we declare that such a statement is in itself immoral. It is possible that the book ought to have been prohibited, as it is possible that the daisy ought to have been ploughed up; but, ploughed up or prohibited, the beauty is the same.

It was not Wordsworth's business to consider whether or not daisies were injurious to grass plots or linnets to crops, but only what beautiful impressions they produced: so, it was not

Mr. Wilde's business to consider whether, on the whole, for the benefit of the state, sunflowers and fairy tales should be prohibited or encouraged, but only what kind of beautiful impressions they produced, or might produce.

Such impressions he stated and described perhaps more explicitly and precisely than other artists before him, but, besides stating that such or such beautiful things were indeed, to those who could see them, beautiful, he insisted with a fervour that was almost Platonic on the importance of beauty to a man's soul ; and on this point he showed, whenever he was attacked, that he was amply capable of defending himself. What was essentially new in his theories, and what drew upon him the greater part of the enmity

with which he is beset, is that he included, among the things for which he claimed that there was an artistic aspect, many things which had before been considered either as only utilitarian or as only trivial.

Mr. Wilde praised the beauty not only of flowers and such other pretty things as may be bought in shops, but also of many things too closely connected with life to be purchasable for money—in fact of all things in which the difference of more or less beautiful can exist. He applied his æsthetic judgement not only to the single arts concerned directly with sight and sound, such as those of the musician, the house decorator, the jeweller, the lover of trees, of arabesques, of lace, flowers, dress materials and so on, but also to

the composite arts concerned with imaginary scenes, and combining impressions of sight with suggestions of this or that in life. These composite arts include those of the poet, the novelist and playwright, the portrait painter, the dandy, and above all the man or woman who can look upon life as a fine art, and the various actions of life as the material out of which a beautiful life may be made, in the same way as a beautiful piece of music is made of notes.

As there need be no assumption, when a man tells us that he likes to look at a certain daisy, that he is lying and says so only for some wicked reason, so there need be no assumption when he tells us that he likes the words, the manner, the action of any drama, real

or imaginary, that his assertion is uncandid.

This leads us to the second group of charges made against Mr. Wilde, which this paper proposes to consider: for as it is useless and ridiculous to suppose, when he says he finds beauty in such or such a dramatic scene, that he is simply lying, and finds, as a matter of fact, no beauty at all, some other element must be looked for in his writings which might have afforded some pretext for calling them immoral. That pretext has, I think, been found in more ways than one.

Some say that when he professed to find beauty in a scene or an event, he meant really to express moral approbation of the conduct of those who took part in it. Others say that his

æsthetic praise was equivalent to an assertion that no moral considerations, however strong, ought to weigh against the smallest drop of beauty, and that if there can be found in any act the least impression of beauty, that act must be considered as completely desirable.

These are perhaps the meanest of all the charges that have been made against him, but they seem to have been insisted on by so many people of one kind or another that a few words must be spared to confute them.

What a monstrous thing it is to assume that a man's words always may mean something other than what they say! Is it not possible to admire Macbeth's speech about murder and Hamlet's about suicide, without being

understood to praise murder and suicide as admirable actions? And may we not say that a snake has a pretty skin although we know the snake to be poisonous?

Nowhere has Mr. Wilde said that moral considerations should be outweighed by artistic ones, nor is there the smallest trace of a hint in any of his books that when he said a thing was pretty he meant anything else than that it was pretty.

Others, however, say that although as long as he confined himself to art criticism he said nothing which we can or need transfer into the region of morals, still that the stories he wrote are, and were by himself intentionally calculated to have an immoral influence, on account of the wicked and false

things said and done by the characters he presents to us. The answer to this charge is simple.

The people who speak these sentences and do these deeds are imaginary people, heroes and villains perhaps, as Shakespeare's are called heroes and villains, heroes with a taint probably, and villains not entirely black; but as to which are heroes, and which villains, neither Shakespeare nor Mr. Wilde tells us.

If a novelist shows a sympathy for one and an antipathy to another of the characters he is creating, he is not then writing fiction, but preaching; and of this no one, I presume, has ever accused Mr. Wilde.

In fact no story can have a moral either good or bad. A story is simply

a story. If people choose to draw a conclusion from a story to the effect that they themselves in their own lives would do well to follow the example of the one character whom they call the hero, and eschew that of the other whom they call the villain, this conclusion (right or wrong) is their own doing and not the writer's.

The only judgment we can come to about a story is that it is beautiful or that it is ugly. The truth or falsehood of what the characters say does not concern us. A well-written story about villains may be more beautiful than a badly written one about heroes.

With some arts, or rather branches of art, especially with music, the popular art, the art perfect in form,

obviously pleasant or unpleasant to the ear of each listener, we all feel this to be true. If I find a certain melody beautiful and another man finds it ugly, it is no defamation to the moral character of either of us. It is simply "tant pis pour lui," and we must each of us, in our musical loves and hatreds, go our own way and say no more about it. This is as true of one art as it is of another.

However, if people will insist on taking a story as a sermon, and expecting it always to tell them that virtue is rewarded and vice punished, let them look carefully through Mr. Wilde's fiction, and they will never be disappointed. Such stories as "The Happy Prince," "The Selfish Giant," "The Model Millionaire," "The Can-

terville Ghost," are too obviously free from anything shocking to be worth while examining now.

But let us take the much maligned "Dorian Gray," and see whether its story is not just what these people like best.

A certain young man does some presumably wicked things, the nature of which is not fully detailed. In short he kills a friend and lives a life full of injury to others as well as to himself. In the end a fairy-tale retribution falls upon him. He dies by his own hand, and his beautiful body, the symbol of all that was fascinating in him, of all that led him to this crime and that, becomes hideous and horrible.

We are at liberty, of course, to like or to dislike the book ; but anyone who

finds in it indecency or nastiness must have put it in himself.

To the pure, Mr. Wilde's books are certainly quite pure.

As for what has been said about the wickedness of writing an affectionate letter in poetical words and sending it to a friend, I cannot help thinking that none but very foul minds can find anything foul in that. *DEFENSE OF O.N. INVERSION*

I am thankful to say that I have received many letters containing expressions of ardent affection, and I am proud to confess that I have at least one male friend who kisses me with a love no less pure than that with which I kiss my wife, my mother or my sisters.

Why must it be assumed that all intercourse between two men must be either mercenary or charitable? The

motives of gain or of charity, usually looked upon as the meanest legitimate motives for any friendship, were suddenly in the case of Mr. Wilde adduced as the highest which fancy could suppose possible ; and if he had a friend who was not able to help him directly to write his plays, or who did not want his spare coppers, it was assumed that for such a friendship no other motive than a criminal one could have existed.

Had no one except Mr. Wilde heard of the friendship of David and Absalom “ passing the love of women ? ”

Did no one know that all Shakespeare’s sonnets were written to a young lord ?

As for warmth of expression, could anything be warmer than Shakespeare’s, which has universally been admitted to

be genuine and pure as well as poetical ?

How about such passages as this, from the 17th sonnet,

“ If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
The age to come would say, ‘ This poet lies,
‘ Such heavenly touches ne'er touch'd earthly
faces.’ ”

or this, from the 20th ?

“ A woman's face, with nature's own hand painted
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion.”

It would be easy to find an indefinite number more of passages expressing the same kind of affection as this, both in prose and in poetry, not only from such ancient writers as Plato and Catullus, but also from modern writers of well-accredited morals.

It may be observed, by the way, that those who, from the absence of rhyme

and verse in Mr. Wilde's letter, refused to call it poetry, would do well to look at the beautiful translation of it in sonnet form by the well-known French poet M. Pierre Louÿs.

His sonnet was published on May 4th, 1893, with the following title.

“A letter written in prose poetry by Mr. Oscar Wilde to a friend, and translated into rhymed poetry by a poet of no importance.”

It is as absurd as it is cruel to suppose that a man, because he is brilliant cannot be affectionate, and because he does not choose to use rhyme, may not express his affection in prose.

If he had wanted to express or suggest anything lascivious, he would have done so.

The letter is simply a warm and poetical expression of admiration for his friend's beauty, and affection for his soul.

That he should in this prose poem have praised a young man's lips instead of a young lady's eyebrows, and that he should have told us that Dorian Gray was a very handsome young man instead of spending the customary number of pages in describing the beauty of his heroine, merely suggests that the type of beauty presented by the Hermes of Praxiteles was to him not less beautiful than that of the Venus of Milo.

If it is to be made to mean anything else, we cannot escape from the conclusion that every poem, every novelist's description of physical beauty

must have been written with some sinister motive.

As regards Mr. Wilde's influence on his friends, it may first be observed that he sought to have no kind of influence on them. His aim was friendship, not mastery. He makes one of his characters in "Dorian Gray," say bluntly, "all influence is immoral." That is more or less the whole spirit of his friendship with many young men.

One of the healthiest desires of a young man is to retain his youth, to live as a youth, to think, feel, talk, as a youth.

Manners have a meaning, emotions a purity of passion, intellectual activity a hopeful enthusiasm, to be caught then or never. It is all very well to urge that many of the passions and

enthusiasms of youth, when viewed from the cool stand-point of middle or old age, seem trivial ; but in themselves and for themselves, they are necessary, beautiful, fiery, and full of meaning.

We shall have the whole of our older age to look back on our youth if we choose, and to live our older ages as they may lead us. The intensity and hopefulness of youth is as true as the despair of old age, and has at least as good a claim to its own realization.

Common people try to throw hindrances in the way of youth, and bid the young man prepare for a useful life or a successful profession. They tell him to throw away all that he has, in hopes of someday getting something he doesn't want, and perhaps never will want. Mr. Wilde never stood in

the way of young men who wanted, either on their own account or in obedience to their parents or tutors, to use up their youth in such a way. The most that can be said is that he understood the old motto, "maxima debetur pueris reverentia," and when he came across a young man who had ardent enthusiasms of youth, he did not snub them.

That he was not preaching or dictating to them in any way is shown by the fact that he showed the same sympathetic admiration for the religious ardour of a youthful ascetic as for the diligence of a budding scholar, the fantastic aspirations of a young painter, or for any other kind of enthusiasm, whether the object of it was to his taste or not.

Some people have been unable to understand how it is that Mr. Wilde had some friends and acquaintances who were either not rich or not clever or not highly educated.

The explanation is that he saw as most of us see, if we will only confess it, that a bright street boy has often more humour, more life in him, than some of those on whose dress and education more money has been spent. If I go into the billiard room of a public house, I do not generally find my "social equals" there, but I may find most excellent good company, and just such company as is the most perfect relief to me after a day either of hard work or of more or less intellectual conversation.

A parson does not want to be always

talking with parsons about theology ; nor does a playwright want to be always talking with other litterateurs about books. A friendship which cannot be alloyed by criticism is sometimes the most precious.

Though I have heard it said in general terms that Mr. Wilde's influence on his friends was bad, I have never yet met with or heard of anyone who was able to produce a single instance of a man who had been spoiled by him, or of any definite injury that he had ever done to anyone ; nor can I find any trace of it either in the nature of the man, or in the nature of his friends.

As far as I can judge of his friendship without ever being acquainted with him myself, it must have been, in its aim and in its actuality, just such a friend-

ship as is "the beginning of wisdom," a friendship based entirely on itself, and in which neither influence nor mastery have any part.

We may now pass on to the charge made against Mr. Wilde, that he led a vicious life.

This is obviously the hardest charge to meet, and for many reasons, but, I may point out, that whatever judgments may be passed on his life should not affect our criticism of his literature; for even if we have proved a man to be a poisoner, we have not impeached his prose.

A work of art made, whether it is a necklace, or a symphony, or a novel, is, as already suggested, exactly the same, whatever may be discovered at any time about the man who made it.

We are therefore no longer, for the purposes of this paper, concerned with Mr. Wilde's books; for, as I have already pointed out, there is no autobiography, except of a purely artistic kind, in any of them, and we have no right to infer from any of his writings, which are all either fiction or art criticism, anything as to what he himself did, or why he did it.

Nor do I mean to concern myself with his recent trial, the verdict of which, I am in loyalty bound to suppose, was, upon the evidence adduced, a necessary one.

I shall confine myself to a few speculations, for which I alone am responsible, concerning the nature of the crime of which Mr. Wilde was convicted.

It has been so universally spoken of

by counsel, judge, and newspapers, as being one of the most fearful and horrible crimes which a man can commit, that, were it not that I share with most Englishmen the belief that the limits of free discussion can never be overstepped where the discussion is serious, and earnestly meant for the purpose of eliciting truth, I should perhaps shrink from writing what might, to careless readers, appear like a defence of the practice itself.

In fact I have no intention or wish to advocate the commission of this crime, but merely to substitute, if possible, for the hysterical disgust with which most people seem to regard it, a few considerations as to the point of view from which it might, and perhaps should be regarded. And, first, I

would like to point out that there is an essential difference between a crime and a sin.

A crime is any action which is forbidden by the criminal law of the country in which it is committed. A sin is anything which, for any reason, a man should not knowingly and of his own accord do.

It is apparent that an action may conceivably come under either one of these categories without coming under the other.

For instance, a man may overeat to a sinful extent, but there is nothing criminal in this, unless it can be shown either that he is illegally injuring some other person thereby, or that he is attempting to commit suicide.

Again, there have been circum-

stances when men have been bound by their consciences to break laws which were iniquitous, as in the case of Christian martyrs, who defied the laws of the state in order to keep the laws of their consciences and save their souls.

These considerations are not adduced in order to suggest that paiderastia may not be both criminal and sinful, but rather to point out that our judgments concerning it, if we have to give judgments concerning it, must be two-fold, and of two very different colours.

The criminal courts have no need to take sin into their cognisance, being properly concerned with crime only.

I myself disapprove strongly of the practice of some judges who, when they have given the utmost sen-

tence which the law allows them to give for some crime of which a prisoner is convicted, go on to add rancour to their sentence by thrusting on the criminal the sinfulness of his crime.

If such or such a punishment is the utmost which the law can inflict for a certain offence, the judge, as executor of the law, must be content with it. What amount of sin the prisoner may be guilty of, beyond such crime as the law can punish, is no concern of the judge's.

Now in the case of the crime we are considering, it *is* against the law, and if a man is legally convicted of it, he must be legally punished for it. It may however be questioned whether this act should be forbidden by law at all.

Not only did the Ancients, the civilized Greeks and the organized Romans, think that it was not a matter in which the state should interfere, but the Code de Napoleon takes no notice of it whatever.

Many modern states of a civilisation similar to our own, and professing the same christian religion, do not include it in their criminal law at all, but leave society to inflict the punishment of ostracism if they think fit. And I must say that I think that in this case they are right, and we English are wrong. For the act we are considering is one done by mutual consent of two men, an act which does not in any way render them unable to fulfil the duties of citizenship, and which does not affect directly or indirectly, for good or for

ill, any other person. It seems to me as unreasonable to forbid such an act by law as it would be to forbid over-eating by law.

Now comes the question whether *paiderastia* should always be looked upon as a sin; and here again I may point out that many states, and states which knew many things that we do not know, found no sin in it.

“ In Elis and Bœotia,” says Pausanias, in the *Symposium*, “ the established feeling is simply in favour of these connections, and no one, whether young or old, has anything to say to their discredit. In Ionia and other places, and generally in countries which are subject to the barbarians, the custom is held to be dishonourable; loves of youths share the evil repute

of philosophy and athletics, because they are inimical to tyranny.”

That the Greeks generally looked upon paiserastia as at any rate preferable to fornication is clear from the following passage. Pausanias has been describing the difference between the heavenly Love and the common Love, and he says, “ Now the Love which is the offspring of the common aphrodite is essentially common, and has no discrimination, being such as the meaner sort of men feel, and is apt to be of women as well as of youths.”

That is, of course, no proof that paiserastia was actually beneficial in Greece, still less is it a proof that it would be beneficial as a social institution for the present time. Strong reasons could no doubt be urged

against the advisability of introducing it in England now as a universal practice, and reasons which could probably not be refuted. Nevertheless, we must not forget that in England, in spite of our many excellencies, we certainly are very strongly imbued with that stupid form of conceit, which induces us to believe that we have all the virtues, and that if any other nation has or has had other qualities than ours, they must be vices, other desires, they must be sins.

The crime with which we are dealing is a bodily act ; therefore the first evidence we want is that of doctors. I have asked several doctors, and always been told that they know of no bodily harm which this act does to either of the parties taking part in it.

We may, however, readily admit that, for social reasons connected with our present civilisation, paiderastia is certainly not a thing to be encouraged.

Nevertheless it must not be forgotten that we differ very considerably in our views and opinions about morality from our less puritanic and less ascetic ancestors, and that therefore it may be expected that future ages will think differently from us. Until we can show, of any action, that it must in its nature always be injurious, we have no right to refuse to other ages, past or future, the right to approve where we disapprove.

The verdict of "all time and all existence" may after all, as far as we can see, regard as innocent what to the majority of our age is sinful.

I do not for a moment pretend, as I have said, that I can myself see any good that would accrue to society from the introduction of a general practice in pãiderastia into England now: all that I have been here trying to urge is that there may, for all we know, though not by any means necessarily must be some good in it, that many wise men have in one measure or another approved of it, and that there might be times and circumstances in which it would, at any rate, do no harm.

Why an act so colourless as this appears to be should be looked upon as an awful and heinous sin, instead of at the most, a reprehensible sexual error, I am at a loss to imagine.

To sum up shortly: I do not see any evidence that Mr. Wilde's love for

beauty was a pose ; and if there were such evidence it would not affect me in the least. His books do not seem to me to contain any element that is morbid or immoral. I can find no trace of bad influence in his friendships ; and for the question of his life, as he was convicted (rightly or wrongly, it makes no difference) of breaking a law, he is being punished for breaking a law.

As regards sin, even if we know, or think we know what a man has done, we know nothing about the motive or the manner ; and under these circumstances, any outside judgment is a mere impertinence.

DAL YOUNG.

May 31st, 1895.

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